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HOUSEKEEPERS' CHAT

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Saturday, July 11, 1936

Subject: "OLD AND NEW IN JELLY-MAKING." Information from the Bureau of Home Economics, United States Department of Agriculture.

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One thing seems pretty certain about our Department-of-Agriculture reporter who writes us from Washington every week -- she's a fruit-jelly epicure. And her taste seems to run to fine home-made jelly -- the kind that has a bright sparkling color and the delicate flavor of the fresh fruit, the kind that is clear and translucent, holds its shape but still quivers and is so tender that it cuts sharply and evenly with a spoon. But here -- let me read you her letter about it.

She writes: "Walking down the long halls past the kitchens of the Bureau of Home Economics at this time of year, you are likely to get a whiff of most delicious fragrance. 'Mmm,' you may say to yourself, 'do I smell raspberries, by any chance? Or maybe currants?' And if you look in at the door, you'll probably see a boiling kettle of fruit juice and rows of glasses filling up with bright jelly.

"As you probably know, home jelly-making has been under long and careful investigation at this Bureau. And studies made here have thrown a good deal of light on jelly failures and on ways to make a perfect product.

"Of course, jelly-making is not a new process by any means. Our grandmothers and great-grandmothers used this method of preserving their summer fruits. And nothing was served with more pride at old-fashioned tables than a mold of fine jelly. But no one knew better than old-fashioned housekeepers that making jelly was a precarious process, that even the best and most experienced of cooks was likely to have what she spoke of as 'bad luck' with jelly. Sometimes, for no apparent reason, the jelly just didn't jell -- turned out too soupy to hold its shape. Too often it came out more like sirup than jelly -- a thick, rather sticky mass instead of the tender quaky product desired. And then it often lacked that particular delicate flavor -- almost a fragrance -- of the fruit and had a dull rather than a bright clear color.

"These are some of the problems of the home jelly-maker which the foods people undertook to solve. And today they have most of the solutions.

"Mrs. Yeatman, who has been studying jelly for years, tells me that the kind of fruit you choose and the ripeness of the fruit has much to do with failure and success. And she finds that 2 frequent causes of poor jelly are cooking too much juice at a time, and cooking too long.

"Old-fashioned cooks knew from experience that some fruits would make jelly and some wouldn't jell for love or money. But they didn't know why. The foods people discovered long ago that 3 qualities in fruit were necessary for jelly -- pectin, acid, and flavor. Fruit juice with these three qualities when heated with sugar would form jelly. So the fruits that rank as the best jelliers contain plenty of pectin and acid. Such fruits are currants, gooseberries, tart apples or crabapples, quinces, plums of the Wild Goose type, and wild grapes. You can also make delicious jelly of red and black raspberries and blackberries. But since raspberries and some blackberries may not have quite enough acid, Mrs. Yeatman advises adding 1 tablespoon of lemon juice to each cup of juice.

"Old-fashioned cooks knew, too, that underripe fruit was more likely to make good jelly than ripe fruit. But again they didn't know why. The answer again is pectin and acid. Slightly underripe fruit contains more pectin and acid than ripe fruit. But Mrs. Yeatman says that since ripe fruit has more flavor, you get more flavorful jelly if you use some juice from ripe fruit along with the underripe fruit.

"Now about cooking. Here's a point discovered in these modern jelly studies that many an old-time cook didn't know: Making jelly in small quantities gives better results than cooking the juice in a big batch. Quantity cooking usually means overcooking -- or at least uneven cooking. You get best results from cooking only about 6 quarts of currants at a time, or 8 pounds of apples or grapes. Even if you are going to make a large quantity, the little-by-little method is best.

"The crucial moment when you take the jelly from the stove decides whether the mixture is going to jell or not and also whether it is going to be overdone and come out more like sirup than jelly. Grandmother often tested the jelly by pouring it out on a saucer. But this too frequently meant that the jelly would cook too much while she was testing. Many modern experimenters have invented other tests -- the temperature test, for example. But the jelly-making studies at the Bureau show that the most reliable test of all is the 'sheeting off' test. You dip a large spoon in the boiling jelly, then lift it up and watch the hot liquid as it runs off the side of the spoon. If it does not run off in a steady stream but instead separates in 2 distinct lines of drops which finally 'spread' or 'sheet' together, this is the moment to take the boiling liquid from the stove.

"As I said, some experimenters have tried using a candy thermometer in making jelly and taking the juice off when it registers 219 or 221 degrees Fahrenheit. But tests at the Bureau have shown that the temperature of different batches of jelly is not always the same at the jelling point. It varies with the kind and condition of the fruit. The 'sheeting off' test is still the safest guide.

"You see how this jelly-making business has progressed. Old-time housekeepers started the process and modern investigators have explained and perfected it. Another case of science explaining away 'luck' in cooking."

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